

The Medical Minute: No such thing as a 'safe' tan

May 28 2012, By Rogerio Neves

In the United States, one person dies of melanoma every hour. More than 60,000 new cases of this potentially fatal form of skin cancer will be diagnosed this year, and this number is growing at an alarming rate.

According to the [American Cancer Society](#), [melanoma](#) is the most common form of cancer in young adults 25 to 29 years old and the second most common form of cancer for adolescents and young adults 15 to 29 years old.

New research published in the April issue of [Mayo Clinic Proceedings](#) highlights a dramatic increase in the rates of melanoma among young adults, but especially among young women. According to the study, the incidence of melanoma increased eight times among young women and four times among young men. The researchers looked for first-time diagnoses of melanoma in patients from 18 to 39 years old from 1970 to 2009. What the study pointed out is alarming but is only mirroring what we are seeing in our own practices. Childhood sunburns and ultraviolet (UV) exposure in [adulthood](#) may also contribute to melanoma risk, but the study authors believe that the rise in the use of indoor tanning beds is one of the main reasons behind this trend. Although the data are for a largely white population, the findings are relevant for [health professionals](#) across the country.

As [skin cancer](#) specialists, we often discuss with our patients the potential dangers of tanning and not wearing sunscreen, but incidence of melanoma continues to rise in young adults -- particularly among [female](#)

[adolescents](#) and [young adults](#) -- because they are much more likely to use UV tanning beds than males (in most tanning salons, females make up 80 percent of the clientele). According to the indoor tanning industry, 30 million Americans, or about 10 percent of the population, use tanning beds every year.

Tanning beds have long been associated with an increased risk of skin cancer. A study in Iceland found that the melanoma rates among residents -- who had very little exposure to the sun -- significantly increased after the introduction of tanning beds. But if skin cancer awareness is up, and even though there is a lot of information about the dangers of tanning beds, why are people still using them?

According to a Congressional Report on tanning industry practices published on Feb. 1, the tanning bed industry in the United States is a multi-billion-dollar industry that targets teenage girls with advertising and promotions, denies known risks of indoor tanning, provides false information on benefits of tanning and fails to follow recommendations by the FDA on tanning frequency. The World Health Organization International Agency for Research on Cancer also categorized tanning beds as carcinogenic to humans, the same category as plutonium, arsenic, mustard gas and cigarettes in terms of cancer-causing potential.

Regulations aimed at preventing young people from using [indoor tanning](#) beds, such as those that require parents to sign a consent form for teens younger than 18, have been implemented at state and local levels. But so far they are not working, since tanning salons do not always follow the rules and minors sometimes falsify parents' signatures, making the regulations difficult to enforce.

There are currently two separate bills in the Pennsylvania General Assembly that address the use of [tanning salons](#). The leadership of the Penn State Hershey Melanoma Center is working closely with members

of the House and Senate to ensure that legislation is passed to put appropriate measures in place to protect consumers and restrict the use of tanning beds by minors. The reason is simple: [tanning beds](#) are dangerous and there is no such thing as a safe tan.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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